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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
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RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5416
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 0102
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3660
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASHGABAT 000872

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/IR AND SCA/CEN

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TAGS: [IR](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: IRAN/TURKMENISTAN: UNHCR REPORTS NO MOVEMENT OF
IRANIANS BUT QUIETLY CONSIDERS CONTINGENCIES

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) In a July 9 conversation with Iran Watcher, the UNHCR Representative in Turkmenistan said her office has received no indications that Iranians have been attempting to cross into Turkmenistan recently to seek protection in the wake of the protests and arrests in Iran that followed the June 12 presidential election. Brita Helleland, who heads the UN refugee agency's small office in Ashgabat and is its only expatriate staff member, said that she is in frequent contact with Turkmenistan's State Migration Service, and has not heard from them of any increase in Iranians coming to Turkmenistan. Nevertheless, her office is watching events in Iran closely and thinking about Turkmenistan's level of preparedness should the situation in Iran become unstable. They do not believe that Iranians fearing political persecution in Iran would normally choose to come to Turkmenistan: Most are discouraged from trying by Turkmenistan's strict visa regime, she said, which requires a sponsor and official "Letter of Invitation" (issued by the State Migration Service) before a visa can be issued, although residents of Iranian border regions may receive a short-term, three to five-day entry permit at the border. Given the fact that Iran shares its longest land border with Turkmenistan, however, and the relative ease and safety of reaching this border compared to some others, such as those that Iran shares with Afghanistan or Pakistan, UNHCR believes an influx of Iranians to Turkmenistan should not be discounted should the situation in Iran deteriorate significantly.

LOOKING AHEAD

12. (C) Helleland said that there are currently no Iranian refugees or asylum-seekers in Turkmenistan, where the majority of refugees are of Afghan and other nationalities. In light of the protests and arrests that followed Iran's presidential election four weeks ago, Helleland said that she and her staff have discussed possible scenarios should the situation in Iran worsen: She said they predict that if Iranians fearing persecution were to begin leaving Iran for Turkmenistan, they would likely approach the U.S. and other western embassies to apply for visas or seek refugee status. They also possibly could seek assistance from UNHCR, bypassing the Turkmen authorities entirely. UNHCR is

concerned, she said, that Turkmen authorities have no infrastructure along the border with Iran, such as reception centers, where they would be able to assist entering refugees. (NOTE: The only reception center in Turkmenistan, built by UNHCR, is along the border with Uzbekistan at Ferab. END NOTE.) Helleland is also concerned that Turkmen authorities could refuse entry to Iranians seeking refuge in Turkmenistan, although it is prohibited from doing so under the 1951 Refugee Convention, to which it is a party, as well as its own refugee statute enacted in 1997. UNHCR has provided training in refugee protection to Border and Migration services employees. Officially, the Border Guards are supposed to turn asylum-seekers over to the Migration Service, but they fear there is "no guarantee" that they would follow that procedure should Iranians present themselves at the border and claim asylum.

13. (C) COMMENT: Ashgabat sits just 35 kilometers from the Iranian border and is two hours by car from Mashhad, Iran's second largest city. Although an influx of asylum-seekers from Iran appears unlikely at this time, UNHCR is wisely considering the consequences should this occur in the future, noting that the Turkmen government at present would be ill-equipped to manage such a situation. END COMMENT.
MILES